

Powerful, respected, valued: Why school libraries need a National Year of Reading

By Sue McKerracher

There are plenty of reasons why a [National Year of Reading in 2012](#) will be a good move for Australia.

- Levels of literacy and numeracy in the population as a whole are worryingly low.
- A book at bedtime is no longer the norm for many young children, and there is no guarantee of a reading culture in every home.
- Reading doesn't carry much weight with teenagers and yet it has been proven that young people who read are more likely to hold senior jobs in their 30s.
- More than three-quarters of Australia's major employers say that poor literacy and numeracy in the workforce has a detrimental effect on their business performance.

The National Year of Reading will help draw attention to these sobering facts and prompt discussion about ways in which we can improve the situation. On a more positive note, it will also provide opportunities for people to discover and rediscover the joy of reading.

They are all good reasons, but they are not why libraries and library and information professionals have decided to get behind a National Year of Reading. This campaign could have been driven by bookshops, or literacy organisations, or employers, or the government, but instead, the National Year of Reading 2012 has been created, built and expanded by library organisations.

Seed funding came from the founder partners: ALIA, Public Libraries Australia, public library associations in each state, State Libraries and territory library services. Essential support came from school libraries, the National Library of Australia, and library suppliers. Together, we have turned a good idea into a fully-fledged campaign, with followers, participants, advocates and sponsors both from within and outside the library world.

For the real reason for libraries' initiation of this campaign, we need to go back to July 2009 and the first **ALIA Public Libraries Summit**, at the National Library of Australia, in Canberra. The purpose was to speak to federal government representatives about the vital role of libraries in their communities and to excite politicians and bureaucrats about their extraordinary potential to deliver even greater returns.

However, it was clear from the Summit that the federal government had no connection with libraries, outside the Arts Minister's direct responsibility for the National Library. If libraries – public, school, academic and special – were to feature on the federal government radar, they would need to provide a united front, overcoming state and territory divisions to present themselves as a national network.

The National Year of Reading was a way of showing how effective libraries can be when they work together, across the geographic and political boundaries. It's a campaign that has sufficient flexibility to apply to almost all libraries, and it's especially suited to public libraries and school libraries, which together provide more than 10,000 'shop windows' across Australia.



This wholesale collaboration between libraries across the country has provided a talking point with partners – commercial sponsors, media houses, literacy specialists, as well as government agencies. The incredible level of unity behind a common purpose has commanded a great deal of respect and has made people look again at an institution that many took for granted.

Respect is a term that is particularly interesting in this context. While public libraries are respected and valued by individuals and communities, they must have lost political ground – otherwise, how could you explain the reduction in spending on library budgets by state governments over the last decade? And how can leaders in education say they respect the role of school libraries if they cut library operating budgets to the bone and replace qualified teacher-librarians with unqualified staff?

There are many fabulous librarians and teacher-librarians who have earned the respect of their peers and colleagues, but it's a slow and laborious process, and too random to drive a fundamental change in people's attitude to libraries and library and information professionals.



By contrast, the **National Year of Reading** provides an opportunity to speed up the process and put every library, and libraries as a whole, in a position of power – the kind of power that provides a justifiable shortcut to respect.

Libraries 'own' the National Year of Reading. They have created it, built it, expanded it and brought in all kinds of interesting partners. It's the library that has the imprimatur to create a local steering group; to host a discussion forum; to bring people to the table to talk about an issue that is topical, high profile and fundamental to the nation's future growth and prosperity.

The **National Year of Reading 2012** provides a fantastic opportunity for all Australian libraries to take centre stage in their communities. As founders of the campaign, libraries are the hosts, the enablers, the activity hubs.

This is an opportunity to take centre stage within your school, working with English teachers and literacy educators to create a buzz around reading in 2012. The National Year of Reading is *your* campaign. How are you going to use it?

Think of the important influencers and decision-makers you can set up meetings with to discuss the National Year of Reading – local authors, faith leaders, employers. And while you're talking about the National Year

of Reading, it's a great opportunity to talk about the other amazing programs you run through your school library.

This is your chance to partner with organisations that have power in your community – the parent teachers' association, successful businesses, the emergency services – and to recruit them as active advocates for your library. Also, consider how much better-placed you will be to fend off attacks on your budget and to negotiate for more cash, when you are part of a high profile national campaign with backing from some of the biggest names in the country.

At the national level, library associations, State Libraries and Territory Libraries will be working to establish strong links with federal and state governments. At a local level, school libraries can use the weight of this campaign to their own advantage. The key is not to think of the National Year of Reading as something that belongs to someone else, but to take ownership of it and to use it to the advantage of your library.

Things you can do today:

- Talk to library staff and council colleagues about it
- Ask your colleagues for their ideas
- Set up a meeting with your principal, teaching staff, other libraries, bookshops, local businesses
- Put a line under your email signature
- Add a link from your website
- Become a fan on Facebook
- Approach a local hero to be your ambassador

Imagine the **National Year of Reading** as a tangible object. It has landed in your hands. Now, what are you going to do with it?

Editor's Note:

Since this article was written the following has been announced:

National Year of Reading - Register today

By registering your details with the National Year of Reading 2012, you're telling us that we can count on your support, that there will be branding on display in your library for at least part of the year, and that you will welcome approaches from us telling you about new opportunities as they arise.

And there are some great benefits to be had! Registered libraries will hear about additional promotions, free and downloadable materials, and advance information about national events. All you have to do is complete the registration form online by 15 November, 2011 - visit <http://www.love2read.org.au/registration.cfm>.

Sue McKerracher is a library specialist with The Library Agency, she has worked with the British Library and Museums, Libraries and Archives Council in England. Now based in Victoria, she has been involved with several ALIA public library initiatives in 2009, including the Public Libraries Summit and the creation of a national vision and framework for public libraries. She has carried out projects for the Centre for Youth Literature and produced a report on teenage literacy for the State Library of Victoria entitled *Keeping Young Australians Reading*. The Library Agency are Project Managers for the **National Year of Reading 2012**.